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MOLYNEUX'S QUESTION

The Irish debates

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Introduction

William Molyneux was born in Dublin, studied in Trinity College Dublin (TCD), and was a founding member of the Dublin Philosophical Society (DPS), Ireland's counterpart to the Royal Society in London (Hoppen 1970: x). He was a central figure in the Irish intellectual milieu during the Early Modern period and – along with George Berkeley and Edmund Burke – is one of the best-known thinkers to have come out of that context and out of Irish thought more generally. In 1688, when Molyneux wrote the letter to Locke in which he posed the now famous question about a man born blind made to see,¹ he was an active member of the DPS and was on familiar terms with several other key figures in Irish philosophy at the time. For these reasons, the intellectual environment in Dublin and Ireland is where the effects of Molyneux's famous question would have been most immediately and directly felt. It would be amiss, then, for a survey of the impact and influence of Molyneux's question to omit an examination of its reception in Early Modern Ireland.

Accordingly, our aim in this paper is to chart the reception, and subsequent employment, of Molyneux's question in one of the most contentious issues taken up by Early Modern Irish thinkers, namely, debates concerning human knowledge of the divine attributes. These debates, about whether and how we can gain knowledge of God's nature and attributes, concerned some, if not all, of the most influential figures in Irish thought during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including William King (the archbishop of Dublin from 1702 to 1729), Peter Browne (provost of Trinity College from 1699 to 1710), and George Berkeley (fellow of Trinity College and, later, bishop of Cloyne from 1734 to 1753).

For the most part, Irish thinkers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries answered “no” to Molyneux's question of whether a blind man made to see could distinguish, by sight alone, between a cube and a sphere (1975: II.ix.viii).³ This is most likely due to the influence of Locke's *Essay* (1975: II.ix.viii), which was part of the curriculum at TCD from an early stage after being recommended to the provost by Molyneux himself (Berman 2005: 80). In what follows, we focus on several of those Irish thinkers who took this negative answer to Molyneux's question to have significant ramifications for what a blind man *not yet* made to see could conceive of. We argue that Molyneux's original question about whether a newly sighted individual could differentiate between a cube and sphere by sight, in the hands of Irish thinkers,

became a question about that individual's representational capacities. This modified version of the question concerned whether a blind man not yet made to see could represent to himself ideas of light and colours.

The thinkers we discuss, in what follows, all agree that a blind man could not conceive of light or colours or represent to himself visual ideas more generally.⁴ We argue that *this* claim, that a blind man cannot conceive of light or colours, which is rooted in Molyneux's original question, is central to several significant debates in Early Modern Ireland. These debates concern: the status of Christian mysteries, divine foreknowledge and human freedom, and how to properly understand divine analogies. All three debates are tied to one central issue: how and if we, as finite human beings, can possibly gain knowledge of the divine. We demonstrate that Irish thinkers took the respective relations between blindness and ideas of light and colours, and our knowledge of God and divine attributes, to be analogous to one another. In doing so, we build upon and substantiate David Berman's claim that the "similitude of the blind man... is the root metaphor" of Early Modern Irish philosophy (2005: 87). More specifically, our contention is that the example of a man born blind became a touchstone, or go-to example, for those Irish thinkers aiming to expound and defend their views on the possibility of knowledge of the divine.⁵

The structure of this paper is as follows. In section one, we begin by looking at the debate between John Toland and Peter Browne over the status of Christian mysteries. Toland, infamously, argues that Christian doctrines concerning issues such as the Trinity or transubstantiation, if they are to be believed and affirmed, cannot be mysterious. In his response, Browne introduces the example of the blind man in order to challenge Toland's claim that we cannot reasonably believe in those things of which we have no ideas. In doing so, Browne sets off a chain reaction that would continue into subsequent Irish debates. In section two, we focus on the debate between William King and Anthony Collins over the consistency of human freedom with divine foreknowledge. King argues that the inconsistency is only *apparent* and arises as a result of the mistake of taking God's attributes to be similar to our own. As King sees it, our knowledge of the divine attributes is as ill-informed as a blind man's knowledge of the objects of sight. Collins criticises this claim and points out that if our knowledge of the divine is comparable with a blind man's knowledge of light and colours, then we cannot postulate *anything* about God – not even that he exists. Finally, in section three, we consider Berkeley's response to Molyneux's original question in his *New Theory of Vision* and how this response relates to his account of knowledge of the divine attributes in *Alciphron*, before finally looking at Browne's criticism of that account.

Unlike the Duke of Gloucester in *King Lear*, a blind man led by the mad, over the course of this paper we follow the blind man through these important Irish debates. Ultimately, we argue that this example, derived from Molyneux's original question, is the thread that ties these Irish debates together and conclude that Berman is right to call the man born blind the "root metaphor" of Early Modern Irish philosophy.⁶

Toland and Browne: Christian mysteries and revealed religion

In this section, we outline the debate between John Toland and Peter Browne concerning the status of Christian mysteries and how, in the context of this debate, Browne first introduces the example of a man born blind into Irish discussions about the divine attributes.

In 1696, Toland published his infamous *Christianity not Mysterious (CNM)*. Although Toland set his book up as a defence of divine revelation and revealed religion more generally (*CNM*: 5–13), it was instantly met with heavy criticism.⁷ His anti-clerical arguments and criticisms of

the established Church (CNM: 92–100) not only lead to political prosecution – his book was burnt by the Dublin hangman and subsequently banned from Ireland (Berman 2005: 84) – but also gave rise to a series of philosophical responses. In 1697, shortly after the publication of *Christianity not Mysterious*, the then current Archbishop of Dublin (1694–1703), Narcissus Marsh, sent a copy of the book to Peter Browne who was at the time a senior fellow at TCD. Marsh requested that Browne write an answer to Toland, the result of which was his *Letter in Answer to a Book entitled Christianity not mysterious* (1697).

Browne starts the *Letter* by claiming that even the title of Toland’s book is “nothing but equivocation and sophism” (*Letter*: 10). Browne denies Toland’s claim that Christianity cannot consistently contain mysteries. What’s more, Browne maintains, these mysteries are neither contradictory nor above reason (*Letter*: 7–9). Browne accurately summarises Toland’s position in two postulates:

- (1) [W]e have as clear and distinct Idea’s of all things reveal’d to us in the Gospel as we have of the ordinary Phaenomena of Nature.
- (2) [W]e are oblig’d to give our assent no farther than we have clear and distinct Idea’s of them.

Letter: 36–7

In contrast to this, Browne argues that not only do we *not* have clear and distinct ideas of “those things of another world”, i.e., divine things – we have no immediate and proper idea of them at all. Yet, he argues, this does not mean that we cannot give our assent to them (*Letter*: 37).

It is in regard to Browne’s first point that the example of a man born blind becomes important. Browne maintains we have mediate and improper ideas of God, by which he means notions which are formed by *analogy* (*Letter*: 38). While Browne never explains what he means by “analogy” in the *Letter*, he characterises analogical speech in later works as a “middle way” between literal and metaphorical speech, whereby terms are taken neither “in their *First and Strict*, and literal Propriety; nor in a mere and empty *Figure*” (*Procedure*, 1728: 27). Analogical speech, as Browne sees it, lies somewhere between literal speech and merely figurative speech.⁸ In the *Letter* he uses the “metaphor” of a man born blind to illustrate what he means by “mediate and improper ideas” (*Letter*: 50). According to Browne, our notions of God, things divine, or the mysteries of revealed religion are comparable to a blind man’s conception of light (*Letter*: 53). Browne asks his readers to imagine a man born blind, i.e., someone who has never perceived any of the objects of vision. He argues that this individual, who cannot perceive light and has neither a conception nor even a name for it, could still form a mediate and improper idea of light. Browne claims that it could be explained to him by using “Words and Notions which are already in him” (*Letter*: 51). Given his inability to see, Browne explains that the blind man would form an idea of light from his tactile capacities: “he wou’d think it very like *feeling*, and perhaps call it by that name” (*Letter*: 52).⁹ According to Browne, it is equally impossible for *us* to conceive of the real nature of things divine and revealed. In fact, our “blindness” is even more fundamental because a proper understanding of God’s nature or of the Christian mysteries would require “the alteration of our whole Nature, and the enlargement of all our Faculties” (*Letter*: 53). However, as it is, we form improper and mediate ideas of the divine thanks to God’s revelations which take the form of analogies with things in the world – things of which we *do* have proper and immediate ideas (*Letter*: 55).

While the foregoing discussion of Browne’s solution leaves many questions unanswered, the important point for our purposes is that Browne’s *Letter* marks the second step of the man born blind’s journey in Irish thought (the first being its introduction by Molyneux).

Admittedly, it is not obvious that Browne is drawing on Molyneux's question, that is, whether he applies and transforms the Molyneux man to fit this theological issue, or if he introduces a new man born blind. However, while Molyneux's question about the cube and the sphere is irrelevant for Browne's considerations, it must be noted that Browne *does* apply the tactile faculty to something which can only properly be perceived by sight. Moreover, Browne's man born blind *is* made to see, although God is required to open his eyes, so to speak. Finally, we should consider that the Molyneux question was widely known and discussed at the time, thanks to its publication in the *Essay*, and that Browne and Molyneux were personally acquainted.¹⁰

In short, although it cannot be proven beyond any doubt that Browne's man born blind was inspired by the Molyneux question, we contend that Browne's *Letter* constitutes a pivotal step in the blind man's journey. More specifically, it is the first time the example is applied to theological issues and knowledge of the divine. As will become clear in the next section, this way of re-purposing the Molyneux man proved to be influential in subsequent debates.

King and Collins: human freedom and divine foreknowledge

In this section, we focus on the debate between William King and Anthony Collins over the apparent inconsistency between divine foreknowledge and human freedom. While it should be noted that Collins was not Irish, he claims that the "Question about the *Nature of God*" is "not generally understood in *England*" (*Vindication*: 4). Thus, he at least suggests that he saw himself as engaging in a foreign debate. Although Collins does not label this a specifically Irish debate, it was certainly an issue many Irish thinkers engaged with. For this reason, and because Collins was a fierce critic of King and heavily criticised by Berkeley, he can appropriately be seen as a key figure in this "Irish" debate.

In the following, we argue the connection between the example of a blind man, introduced by Browne, and the blind man *made to see* who is central to Molyneux's question, becomes more explicit in the hands of William King. It will become clear, by the end of this section, that while the Toland/Browne and King/Collins debates are ostensibly over distinct issues – revealed religion and divine foreknowledge respectively – the way in which these thinkers employ the example of a man born blind reveals that there are some central underlying concerns about the possibility of knowledge of the divine.

King was the Archbishop of Dublin from 1703 to 1729 and was personally acquainted with Molyneux, Browne, and Berkeley. He was also a member of the DPS from at least 1693, although there is evidence that he was a member as early as October 1683 (Hoppen 1970: 43). It is thus very likely that King was one of the "divers very ingenious men" Molyneux claims to have discussed his famous question with prior to writing to Locke (1975: II.ix.viii).¹¹ In his sermon on *Divine Predestination*, King defends what he calls the "Doctrine of Predestination" against its apparent inconsistency with the "contingency of events" (*Sermon*: §1–6). King's aim is to render human free will consistent with divine foreknowledge. He does so by arguing that the cases of human and divine foreknowledge are radically different: *humans* could not both possess infallible foreknowledge and be completely free, but King maintains that this inconsistency does not arise in the case of the divine. This is explained by the fundamentally different nature of God's attributes compared to our own:

[I]t is in effect agreed on all hands, that the Nature of God, as it is in it self, is incomprehensible by human Understanding; and not only his Nature, but likewise his Powers and Faculties, and the ways and methods in which he exercises them, are so

far beyond our reach, that we are utterly incapable of framing exact and adequate Notions of them.

Sermon: §3

According to King, virtually everyone agrees that God's nature and attributes are incomprehensible to humans and hence that we have no proper notion of them. In turn, he argues, this explains why we have no proper notion of the divine attributes. While it *seems* to us that foreknowledge and freedom are incompatible, that is only because our notions of both are restricted to *our own* knowledge and freedom. He agrees that “*if* God's Foreknowledge and Predetermination were of the same nature with ours, the same Inconsistency would be justly infer'd” (*Sermon*, §7, our emphasis). However, King maintains, they are not of the same nature as ours: “they are quite of another”. It is in this context that the man born blind makes his first appearance in the *Sermon*:

[W]e have no proper Notion of them [the divine attributes], any more than a Man born blind has of Sight and Colours; and therefore ... we ought no more to pretend to determine what is consistent or not consistent with them, than a blind Man ought to determine, from what he hears or feels, to what Objects the Sense of Seeing reaches.

Sermon: §7

King talks of “Sight and Colours” here, rather than *light* and colours, but his point remains the same. What is important is that King uses the example of a man born blind to illustrate his view that we have no proper notion of God and his attributes. It might *seem* to a blind man that the nature of things is restricted to whatever it is he can have notions of, that is, that things could only be the objects of touch, taste, smell, or hearing. Yet, King argues, those who are not blind “know better”: we can *see* things too. If the blind man were to judge what things are really like based purely on his own representational capacities, then he would conclude that the objects of vision do not exist. But the objects of vision *do* exist – the blind man just cannot perceive them. King's point is that we are in no better position to make proclamations about what is possible for God than a blind man is to make proclamations about the objects of sight. If we judge what God could be like based on our own conceptions alone then it will *appear* that divine foreknowledge is inconsistent with human freedom. But, like the blind man in regard to light and colours, we ought not make judgements about God based on our restricted representational capacities. Just as a man born blind has no adequate notion of light and colours, *we* have no adequate notion of divine foreknowledge (*Sermon: §30*). In short, then, King's solution to the problem is to argue that the inconsistency is only apparent.

Admittedly, the details of King's description of a man born blind differ from both Molyneux's original example and Browne's treatment of it. In contrast to the Molyneux man, King's blind man is not, at first, made to see and, unlike Browne, he neither calls it a metaphor nor is he focused on what kind of notion of light a blind man could have. However, upon closer inspection it is clear these differences are superficial, and that King's use of the man born blind is more than a mere verbal coincidence. For example, King takes up what seems like a reversed version of the Molyneux problem when he denies the blind man could infer from tactile perceptions anything about what visual perceptions would be like. Moreover, King *does* draw a comparison with a blind man made to see several sections later. He explains that our knowledge of the divine attributes is, *at first*, equal to the blind man's knowledge of light and colours. However, our prospects with regard to God's attributes are more promising than a blind man's with regard

to light and colours because we can hope to attain knowledge of the divine attributes in the next life (*Sermon*: §12).¹²

Anthony Collins, an English free-thinker (one who rejected religious authority in favour of reason and experience as a source of knowledge) responds to King's *Sermon* in his *Vindication of the Divine Attributes* (1710). Collins rails against King's claim that God's attributes are different in kind from our own and that we cannot have proper knowledge of them. As he puts it, on King's account, "Wisdom, Mercy, Justice, Knowledge, Foreknowledge, Vertue, and all other Attributes of God ... [are] as improperly apply'd to him, as *Eyes or Ears, Love or Hatred*, or any other humane Parts and Passions" (*Vindication*: 9). From the outset, Collins rejects King's suggestion that it is agreed "on all hands, that the Nature of God, as it is in itself, is incomprehensible by human Understanding" (*Sermon*: §7). In fact, Collins maintains that "the opinion of the generality of Christians, and particularly of almost all our modern Divines and Philosophers" is that God's attributes are of the "same manner" as our own, albeit perfect (*Vindication*: 4). Collins acknowledges King's motivation for advocating this view. Picking up on King's remark that "we have no more proper Notion of Foreknowledg[e] and Predetermination in God than a Man born blind has of Sight and Colours", Collins agrees with King that, "this way of understanding the Attribute of Foreknowledg[e] does without all question reach his Grace's purpose; for no Inconsistency can be perceiv'd by us to lie between two things, one of which we have no conception of" (*Vindication*: 11).

However, according to Collins, while King's solution to the problem of inconsistency is *technically* successful, it comes at a heavy price. King's claim is that the inconsistency is only apparent because we take God's foreknowledge to be like our own. Collins, however, points out that at best King has given us sufficient grounds for *doubting* that there is such an inconsistency, for "no Inconsistency can be *perceiv'd* by us" between two things if we do not have a conception of one of them (*Vindication*: 11, our emphasis). As Collins sees it, it follows from King's reasoning that we cannot *know* that there is an inconsistency between human freedom and divine foreknowledge. But this is not the same as establishing that the two *are* consistent. To illustrate his point Collins uses the example of a man born blind. He argues that just as a blind man is not in a position to make judgements about the relation between "*Light*" and "*Motion*" (*Vindication*: 12) – because he does not have a conception of the former – if King is right then we cannot be certain, one way or the other, whether divine foreknowledge and human freedom are consistent or inconsistent. Likewise, just as a blind man cannot argue either for or against the existence of light and colours, if King is right then "it is impossible for him to prove the Existence of God against Atheists" (*ibid.*).

Overall, Collins' point is that equating human knowledge of the divine to a blind man's knowledge of light and colours comes at a cost. King seems to be unaware of this, however, and, as Collins sees it, ends up wanting to have his cake and eat it. Just as a blind man is not in a position to make proclamations about the objects of sight, if King is right then *we* are not in a position to make proclamations about the divine. The problem, according to Collins, is that this means we cannot say *anything* about what is and is not consistent with God's attributes.

According to Collins, King cannot consistently maintain that we have no more knowledge of the divine than a blind man has of light or colours, for this would render us unable to make any proclamations about God at all. Yet, in maintaining that human freedom *is* consistent with divine foreknowledge, Collins points out, that is exactly what King is doing. As he explains:

This Assertion agrees not with what his Grace had deliver'd before, *viz. That we have no proper Notion of God's Foreknowledge and Predetermination, any more than a Man born blind has of Sight and Colours; and therefore we ought no more to determine what is consistent*

or not consistent with 'em, than a blind man ought to determine, from what he hears or feels, to what Objects the Sense of Seeing reaches.

Vindication: 22

Most importantly for our present concerns, Collins accepts the general consensus that a man born blind has no conception at all of light and colours. Like King and Browne before him, Collins uses this claim as a touchstone for his own views.

In the hands of King, the example of a blind man becomes central to the debate over the consistency of human freedom and divine foreknowledge, and thereby becomes further entrenched in Irish debates over human knowledge of the divine. Moreover, King explicitly draws on the man born blind *made to see* who is at the heart of Molyneux's original question. Collins, likewise, situates his own views regarding knowledge of the divine in relation to a blind man's capacity to represent to himself ideas of light and colour.

Berkeley and Browne: analogical knowledge

In this section, we briefly outline Berkeley's explicit engagement with the Molyneux question, and the man born blind *made to see*, in his *New Theory of Vision* (*NTV*, in 1948–57, vol. 1¹³), before focusing on his employment of the example of a blind man in his later work *Alciphron* (*Alc.*, 1948–57, vol. 3). In dialogue four of the latter text, Berkeley engages with the problem of divine attributes and criticises King's analogical account of human knowledge of the divine. We show that Berkeley, like Browne and King before him, uses the blind man as a touchstone for his own views regarding knowledge of the divine. We then address Browne's criticism of Berkeley's account, thereby rounding off the journey of the blind man through Irish philosophy in the same way it started: in the hands of Browne.

In the *New Theory*, Berkeley provides an in-depth response to Molyneux's question. The text has two aims, the second of which is to “consider the difference there is betwixt ideas of sight and touch, and whether there be any idea common to both senses” (*NTV* §1).¹⁴ Ultimately, his answer is a negative one; there are no ideas common to both senses. Berkeley's claim, which he establishes over the course of the text, is that the constant connection that we perceive between certain visual experiences (e.g., seeing shapes with corners) and certain tangible experiences (e.g., the feeling of sharpness) is only a “habitual connexion that experience has made us to observe between them” (*NTV* §147). Berkeley frequently employs the man born blind example in order to illustrate the impossibility, as he sees it, of objects that are common to both senses. His conclusion, he explains, is confirmed by “the solution of Mr. Molyneux's problem” (*NTV* §132).¹⁵ The reason being that, if the objects of sight and touch were one and the same, a blind man would already be familiar with the objects of sight, albeit in a more limited way than those who are not blind.

Berkeley, like the other figures we have discussed so far, is clearly convinced by Molyneux and Locke's negative response to the question of whether a blind man *made to see* could differentiate between a cube and a sphere by sight. With that in mind, he explains that “if a square surface perceived by touch be of the same sort with a square surface perceived by sight, it is certain the blind man here mentioned might know a square surface as soon as he saw it” (*NTV* §133). For, if a tangible square and a visible square were of the “same sort”, presenting the no longer blind man with a cube would simply be “introducing into his mind by a new inlet an idea he has already been well acquainted with”. We are left with a dilemma, although not a difficult one to get out of as far as Berkeley is concerned. Either we allow that “visible extension and figures are specifically distinct from tangible extension and figures, or else that the solution

of this problem given by those two thoughtful and ingenious men is wrong". The latter option is never seriously entertained. It is clear, then, that Berkeley places considerable weight on the response to the problem provided by Molyneux and Locke.

Berkeley's employment of the Molyneux question, and his commitment to a negative answer in order to argue for this "heterogeneity thesis", is well-known. However, like the other Irish thinkers we have discussed so far, Berkeley also employs the example of a man born blind *not yet made to see* in his account of our knowledge of the divine. In a letter to his friend Percival, from 1 March 1710, Berkeley writes:

I met with some who supporting themselves on the authority of Archbishop of Dublin's [i.e., King's] sermon concerning the prescience of God, denied there was any more wisdom, goodness or understanding in God than there were feet or hands, but that all are to be taken in a figurative sense; whereupon I consulted the sermon and to my surprise found his Grace asserting that strange doctrine.

Hight, 2013: 36

While this letter attests to an early interest in the problem of divine attributes, it wasn't until 1732 and the publication of *Alciphron* that Berkeley commented on the issue publicly and explicitly. There, in §§16–22 of the fourth dialogue, Berkeley argues the difference between divine and human attributes is one of degrees rather than nature. As one of his spokespersons, Crito, puts it:

But for your part, Alciphron, you have been fully convinced that God is a thinking intelligent being, in the same sense with other spirits, though not in the same imperfect manner or degree.

Alc. 4.22, 171

While Berkeley does not explicitly say that human and divine attributes are of the same nature in this instance, it is confirmed by several remarks in his earlier works. For example, in the *Three Dialogues* (*FHP*, 1948–57, vol. 2) he argues we can represent the nature of God to ourselves, via the immediate knowledge we have of our own minds (*DHP* 3.231).¹⁶ As Berkeley's spokesperson Philonous in the *Three Dialogues* explains:

[M]y soul may be said to furnish me with an idea, that is, an image, or likeness of God, though indeed extremely inadequate. For all the notion I have of God, is obtained by reflecting on my own soul heightening its powers, and removing its imperfections. I have therefore, though not an inactive idea, yet in my self some sort of an active thinking image of the Deity.

DHP 3.231–232

This view, that the difference between God and humankind is one of degree, puts Berkeley at odds with King who, as we saw previously, maintains that the two are completely different in nature or kind – to borrow Berkeley's terminology, King thinks that humans and God are entirely *heterogenous*. Berkeley is well-aware of this and, importantly for our purposes, employs the example of a blind man to make it clear that his view is different from King's. He writes:

This doctrine, therefore, of analogical perfections in God, or our knowing God by analogy, seems very much misunderstood and misapplied by those who would infer

from thence that we cannot frame any direct or proper notion, though never so inadequate, of knowledge or wisdom, as they are in the Deity; or understand any more of them than one born blind can of light and colours.

Alc. 4.21, 171

This conclusion is clearly a thinly veiled criticism of King. Contrary to King (*Sermon*, §12), Berkeley thinks we have a better notion of the divine attributes than a man born blind can have of light and colours.

Like Browne, Berkeley argues that our knowledge of God and the divine attributes is analogical. However, unlike Browne, Berkeley argues that analogies are employed in the case of two things that differ in *proportion*, not in kind (*Alc. 4.21, 169*). He cites a common scholastic example of an analogy between a prince and a pilot, explaining that “he who governs the State [a prince] is analogous to him who steers a ship [a pilot]”. The analogy, in this instance, does not straddle two things which are different in kind, but two things that operate similarly but at different levels: a pilot guides a ship while a prince guides a whole state. However, Berkeley does not deny that we *sometimes* do speak metaphorically about God. For example, when we attribute to God “a finger, an eye, or an ear [or] when he is said to repent, to be angry, or grieved” we *are* speaking metaphorically because those attributes, in their strict and proper sense, imply imperfections – which God does not have. But Berkeley argues “the case is different when wisdom and knowledge are attributed to God”. Knowledge does not imply a defect or imperfection and therefore *can* be attributed to God in its strict and proper sense. As such, when we say that God’s knowledge and human knowledge are different, we should simply take this to mean that they differ in *proportion* and *not* in kind or nature.

In distinction to this, Berkeley thinks the difference between a blind man’s notion of light and a sighted person’s conception of light is not one of proportion, or degree, because a blind man has no conception of light *at all*. It is not true to say, at least as Berkeley sees it, that a blind man’s conception of light is an imperfect form of a sighted person’s, because a sighted person has a capacity – that of perceiving by sight – that a blind man does not possess. It is for this reason that Berkeley thinks that King is wrong to compare our conception of God’s attributes to a blind man’s conception of light and colours.

Some months after Berkeley’s *Alciphron*, Browne published *Things Divine and Supernatural Conceived by Analogy* (1733). In Chapter 8 of that work, it becomes clear that he took Berkeley’s arguments in dialogue four of *Alciphron* to be a direct attack on his own views:

Just as this Treatise was finished and sent away to the Press, I was very accidentally surprised with a threatening Appearance of a powerful Attack upon the Doctrine of *Divine Analogy*, from an anonymous Author [i.e., Berkeley].

Divine Analogy: 374

It then becomes clear that Browne takes issue with Berkeley’s account of knowledge by analogy. Berkeley’s view is that analogies between human and divine attributes concern two things that differ in *proportion*. In Chapter 8 of *Divine Analogy*, Browne rejects these claims in favour of the view that divine analogies concern two things which are different in *kind* or *nature*. Thus, when we talk of the divine attributes, he maintains, we talk of “incomprehensible and ineffable Perfections” which are nonetheless “*Correspondent and Similar*” to our own (*Divine Analogy: 379*).

What is significant for our purposes is that Browne picks up on Berkeley’s reference to the man born blind and responds in considerable depth (*Divine Analogy: 408–16*) – indeed,

in more depth than Berkeley himself had done. He argues that Berkeley's claim that our conception of God's attributes is *not* comparable to a blind man's conception of light and colours suggests that Berkeley "must *Understand* very little of the Doctrine of Analogy" (*Divine Analogy*: 409). We saw previously Berkeley thinks we can conceive of God by means of the immediate knowledge we have of ourselves, since humans and God are one and the same kind of thing. But Browne provides his readers with a test that is intended to undermine this claim. He appeals to his readers to close their eyes, "lay aside all *Ideas of Sensation*", and then try to find "any *Idea*, or *Immediate Consciousness*, or *Direct Notion* of anything divine and supernatural" (*Divine Analogy*: 410–11). From there, he argues if his readers *cannot* conceive of the divine under the conditions prescribed, as he clearly suspects will be the case, then we ought to accept that "a Man born blind *can* as well form a *Direct* and *Immediate* Idea or Conception of Light and Colours, as we can in our present State of Blindness of the real Attributes or Perfections of God" (*Divine Analogy*: 411). In other words, Browne claims we have no more of a *direct* or *immediate* conception of God than a blind man has of light or colour. His aim is to reduce our *immediate* knowledge of the divine from the elevated state at which Berkeley had placed it back down to the level of a blind man's knowledge of light and colours.

Browne thinks that just as the blind man has no *direct* conception of light or colours, we have no direct conception of the divine. This can be proven, he believes, by the test outlined above. The two cases, Browne argues, are nonetheless different. The difference lies in the fact that while a blind man has no "Notion of any thing which carries in it a real Similitude and Correspondency to Light or Colours" (*Divine Analogy*: 416), we *do* have access to something that resembles the divine: "our own intellectual Perfections and moral Endowments". Browne's view, then, is that our own and God's attributes are *alike*, since we are made in the image of Him (*Divine Analogy*: 414), despite being different *in kind*. While Browne does not elaborate further on the details of this likeness relation, the important point for our purpose is that, as he sees it, this is precisely what distinguishes the case of the blind man's conception of light and colours from our own conceptions of the divine. The blind man's conceptions and the objects of sight are *neither* alike in any way, nor the same in kind. Conversely, Browne argues, our conceptions of God's attributes are a "remote" but *nonetheless* "lively Transcript" of His "*Archetypal* Perfections" (*Divine Analogy*: 417). Hence, he thinks, there is an important difference between the two cases. A little later Browne explains that our own attributes are "*Natural Representatives*" of God's: they represent, by means of resemblance, things that are of an entirely different kind to them (*Divine Analogy*: 422). A blind man, however, does not have access to any "natural representatives" of light or colours and thus remains in the dark, so to speak, as to their nature.

The key difference between Berkeley and Browne lies in their views about the *immediacy* of human knowledge of the divine. Berkeley seeks to raise our immediate knowledge of God's attributes above that of a blind man's knowledge of light and colours. Meanwhile, Browne, although he does not go so far as King, demotes our knowledge of God to *mediate* knowledge. For, as he sees it, our knowledge of the divine involves an analogy between two things of different kinds.

Conclusion

Over the course of this paper, we have charted the progress of the example of a blind man through three distinct Irish debates in the Early Modern period: the Toland/Browne debate over Christian mysteries and revealed religion, the King/Collins debate over the apparent

inconsistency of human freedom with divine foreknowledge, and the Berkeley/Browne debate over the proper understanding of divine analogies. We have argued that the example of the blind man, the roots of which lie in Molyneux's original question, is the thread that ties these three debates together. More specifically, we argued that these thinkers' repeated use of this example reveal that these ostensibly separate debates all revolve around a single issue: how and if we, finite human beings, can gain knowledge of the divine. As such, we contend, the figure at the centre of Molyneux's question – the blind man made to see – albeit in a modified form, inhabits an important place in the philosophy of Molyneux's compatriots. In the hands of Early Modern Irish thinkers, the blind man and, specifically, the claim that a blind man cannot possibly conceive of light or colours, becomes a touchstone or point of reference by means of which thinkers could make it immediately clear where they stood in regard to this much contested issue. It should become clear, therefore, that Molyneux's question provided a conceptual tool that was integral to those thinkers in Ireland preoccupied by the issue of human knowledge of divine attributes. In this way, we have provided further reasons for thinking that, in Berman's words, the man born blind is the “root metaphor” of Early Modern Irish philosophy.

Notes

- 1 The first iteration of the Molyneux problem can be found in a letter from 7 July 1688 that Locke never replied to. See Locke 1978: 482.
- 2 References are to book number, chapter number, section number.
- 3 Berman lists Edward Synge and Francis Hutcheson as two Irish figures who give an affirmative answer (2005: 88).
- 4 Interestingly, this is also true for Synge (1726: 282) despite the fact that he gave a positive answer to the original Molyneux question as early as 1695 ([1708: 134–141]). This further emphasises how widely accepted the claim that a blind person cannot conceive of light and colours was in the Irish intellectual milieu at the time.
- 5 This paper develops an argument introduced in Fasko and West (forthcoming) where we also emphasise the important role that the example of a man born blind played in Early Modern Irish thought. The two papers, alongside one another, are an extended attempt to substantiate Berman's claim that the Molyneux man is the “root metaphor” of Early Modern Irish philosophy.
- 6 Herein, we offer *one* explanation as to why the example of the blind man is so widely employed by Irish thinkers, which is least weight by our assumption that thinkers are more likely to be influenced by what is going on in their immediate intellectual environment. Another possible explanation is that the thinkers we discuss were influenced by Ibn Ṭufayl's employment of a similar example. For more on that, see Lenn E. Goodman, Chapter 2 in this volume.
- 7 For example, the titular antagonist in dialogue seven of Berkeley's *Alciphron* is clearly intended to represent Toland's views concerning the use of language and the status of Christian mysteries (in other dialogues the free-thinkers Alciphron and Lysicles expound the views of (e.g.) Collins or Hutcheson). But Alciphron goes further than Toland ever did, arguing that Christianity is guilty of having “raise[d] a dust and dispute[d] about tenets purely verbal” (*AMP* 7.3) and that “other men, if they examined what they call Grace with the same exactness and indifference, would agree with me that there was nothing in it but an empty name” (*AMP* 7.4). Alciphron's claim, which is stronger than Toland's, is that words pertaining to Christian mysteries, like “grace”, are nonsense terms. For more on the relation between Toland and *Alciphron*, see Pearce 2017, 474–8 and West 2019.
- 8 For more on Browne's notion of analogy and how it relates to knowledge, see Pearce (forthcoming).
- 9 Browne is perhaps reacting to seventeenth-century reports of individuals claiming to be able to differentiate between colours by touch. Robert Boyle, in his *Experiments and Considerations touching Colours*, discusses two men – “the blind Dutchman” and “the blind Earl of Mansfield” – both of whom claimed to be able to discern the colours of objects by touch. (1772: 707–8). Margaret Cavendish references such reports in her *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666/2001) and is committed to the view that colours *can* in principle be distinguished by touch (2001: 83). For more on Cavendish, see Marcus Adams, Chapter 5 in this volume.

- 10 In a letter from 20 July 1697, Molyneux expressed his displeasure with Browne's *Letter* to Locke: "[T]he author is my acquaintance, but two things I shall never forgive in his book one is the foul language and opprobrious names he gives Mr. Toland" (1708, 40–1). However, Molyneux's displeasure did not affect the success of Browne's *Letter*. Archbishop Marsh was so pleased with it that he recommended Browne for the provostship at TCD, a post Browne eventually held from 1699 until 1710 (during which time Berkeley was a student) before serving as Bishop of Cork and Ross until his death in 1735 (Winnett 1974: 18).
- 11 It is clear that the Molyneux question predates 1693 since Molyneux's first letter to Locke was written in 1688. By the time Berkeley presented his paper *On Infinites* to the DPS in 1707, King was the society's vice-president and Browne one of its officers. In 1707 the DPS was re-founded by Berkeley's confidant Samuel Molyneux, son of William. For more on the chequered history of the DPS, see: Hoppen 1970.
- 12 This parallel to Browne's solution was noticed by Browne himself who thought King was adopting his solution without proper acknowledgement (*Faith*: 29). For more on the personal relationship of King and Browne, see: Winnett 1974: 4–6 and 29–36.
- 13 References to *NTV* are by section number; references to *DHP* are by marginal number; references to *Alc.* are by dialogue number followed by section number, as well as page number.
- 14 The first aim is to "show the manner wherein we perceive by sight the distance, magnitude, and situation of objects." (*NTV* §1). For an insightful discussion of *NTV* in general and the heterogeneity thesis in particular, see Atherton 2020: ch. 2.
- 15 Berkeley also uses the example repeatedly in *Theory of Vision Vindicated* (*TVV* §6, §§44–45, and §51). Most notably Berkeley concludes the book by quoting from a report of William Cheselden (see 1728) about an actual man born blind made to see which he thinks shows "by fact and experiment, those points of the theory which seem the most remote from common apprehension were not a little confirmed, many years after I had been led into the discovery of them by reasoning" (*TVV* §71).
- 16 Berkeley thus agrees with King that we can only gain knowledge of God "by resembling him with something we do know and are acquainted with" (*Sermon*: §8). The difference is that Berkeley, unlike King, thinks the knowledge we have of our own spirit *can* play this role (Pearce 2018: 186–8). For more on Berkeley's position and its historical context, see Fasko 2019.

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